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# Symposium on Television Violence

## Colloque sur la violence à la télévision

A SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY  
OF CRITICAL WORKS  
ON VIOLENCE IN THE ARTS\*



\*one of a series of papers prepared by the following researchers:

David Balcon	Catherine Richards
Michèle Baril	Roger Richer
Normand Gamache	Susan Schachter
John Horvath	Janet Solberg
Diane Labrecque	Nigel Weir
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Views expressed in these papers do not necessarily reflect those of the Canadian Radio-Television Commission

Donald Gordon Centre, Queens University, Kingston.

Canadian Radio-Television  
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The critic is the pioneer of education and the shaper of cultural tradition...A public that tries to do without criticism, and asserts that it knows what it wants or likes, brutalizes the arts and loses its cultural memory...The only way to forestall criticism is through censorship, which has the same relation to criticism that lynching has to justice.

Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism

### Scope of Bibliography

This is a selective bibliography surveying critical works on violence in the arts. It represents works approaching the subject from a qualitative point of view, the implication being that this kind of analysis of violence has been neglected, and deserves to be recognized as a distinct approach. There is no intention to measure quality, but rather to highlight an approach that is not quantifiable.

It is therefore to be expected that this is an eclectic collection of titles. In it will be found works on both the classic and popular arts, and works treating their expression on various media.

This bibliography is not an exhaustive analysis or a complete synthesis of critical works which illuminate the use of violence in human expression. Rather it is a first effort at searching out the scattered efforts of critics,



literary and media historians and philosophers in the hope that this approach to violence can elicit efforts at further systematic research.

### Purpose of Bibliography

Since the representation of violence remains for the public the most striking symptom of malaise associated with the functioning of mass media, it is important to extend research beyond the most studied facets of the situation, and to examine and inventory all approaches, all possibilities for study. This might assist in the formulation of more coherent and pertinent methods, and of more precise and positive objectives for our systems of communication.

The competence and discipline of criticism has not generally been associated with the public discussion of violence in the media. Yet it is the critic who is in the vanguard of framing standards, recalling links with complex cultural traditions, and analysing social and human patterns that recur in creative works over time. It is the critic who possesses the competence to distinguish the function of violence or any other literary element as either an integral dramatic or

imaginative quality in a work, or as a device to involve a mass audience.

This bibliography attempts to bring to the attention of media research critical or philosophical works which situate the role of violence as a dramatic element, its legitimate if not necessary role among other literary or dramatic techniques.

### The Framework

The use of violence as a theme or device in cinema and television is built on long literary and theatrical traditions. The roots of the expression of violence in everyday life go back to the dawn of civilization; its use in the theatre goes at least as far back as Greek tragedy. This bibliography attempts to cover the theme of violence as a dramatic convention in the arts from Greek theatre down to the present day.

This bibliography is therefore a critical road map for the various forms violence has taken in different modes of artistic expressions through different periods. It is not a collection of non-scientific works which attempt to explain the social basis of the phenomenon,

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but rather a collection of that criticism which bears on the universal character of the phenomenon in human expression.

### Philosophical and Aesthetic Concepts of Violence

Insofar as literary uses of violence are or may be influenced by underlying philosophical concepts, several works have been included under this heading.

If violence can be considered as one of the many devices or conventions that an artist has at hand to render experience into an object that can be shared by many, the philosophical concept of violence has undergone marked changes with time. For example, whereas in the middle ages violence was justified as a means of eradicating evil, contemporary philosophy has tended to find more positive interpretations<sup>3</sup>. It sees a dialectic justification, linked to the development of society and the individual. Thomas Hobbes\*, probably the greatest of the philosophers of violence, sees the state of nature as a state of violence:

It is the state without law, without morality  
It is the state of war of everyone against  
everyone else

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\*Lucien Mugnier-Pollet Violence et morale, p. 38



In aesthetics, which has been the critical voice of fine art, the traditional aesthetic lexicon emphasized such concepts as beauty, divinity, harmony and the sublime. From the beginning of the 18th century, the emphasis began to shift towards ideas of disintegration, reform, naturalism, pessimism, democratic art and even nihilism.<sup>7.8.</sup>

### Violence in Literature and the Theatre

Although violence has virtually always been represented in the arts, this representation has taken different forms and taken on different significance in different eras and cultures. If the history of theatre and literature is situated in light of the use of violence, it can be deduced that the concept of violence has evolved and been transformed parallel to the evolution of society.

For example, French literature and theatre are founded on traditions of Greek drama. Greek tragedies were repeated or adapted according to the tastes of the time, based on the same mythical conflicts. Almost by definition, drama requires the concept of human conflict, the basic plot being the opposition between two individuals, or between one or several and society.

Certain twentieth century dramatists have made a clean break with these conventions. They did not set out to create works of literature, rather they set out to change society. The works of Breton or Artaud<sup>13.</sup> demonstrate how revolutionary was this concept of art. They preached a violence in art that was both ideological and moral. The movement opened the door for such novelist-philosophers as Camus and Sartre to introduce new concepts of violence into literature. Here violence was basically on an existential plane which was transformed into physical acts only to demonstrate a philosophical idea.<sup>32.</sup> Such works provide a clue to the basic difference between the American and European traditions of violence as a dramatic convention.

The "Nouveau Théâtre" is perhaps the most representative in this sense. Considered as one of the most violent, it is in no way intended to be a representation of reality.<sup>17.</sup> It is essentially theatre as a philosophical statement, and as such constitutes a radical departure in use of dramatic form and language not to involve or entertain, but to outrage the spectators. Violence is used as a device to denounce violence. The audience is forced to feast its eyes on violence and to judge its meaning.



### Violence and the "Popular" Arts

Among the whole body of critical works which may illuminate the role of violence, those dealing with violence in the "popular" arts are by far the most numerous. The "popular" arts may be defined as those arts which belong to mass culture and which must treat art objects or works as commodities that are consumed by a large cross section of the population. Fine art has not, at least up to the recent past, lent itself easily to the marketing practices of mass consumption. Under this latter heading we find science fiction, melodrama in the theatre, crime, police or detective novels, comics, and television and film.<sup>79.9</sup>

Because of its formative influence in film and television, and its continued massive consumption in both North America and Europe, particular attention should be drawn to the crime-detective novel. Violence is its basic component. Moreover, as the French critic Tourteau has pointed out, it achieves its popularity by allowing the reader to closely identify with a hero or heroes freed of all social, legal and sexual taboos.<sup>42.</sup>

Again, there is an interesting comparison to be made between French and American models, both in crime novels

and television and film dramas. The European detective novel poses a problem which has to be solved at various levels. The American counterpart is more often a connected series of actions with a specific goal.<sup>40.</sup>

The cinema is a twentieth century phenomenon and draws on the concerns and spirit of its time. However, it has not evolved in the same way in every culture.<sup>48.</sup> This affects any selection of critical works. For the French, for instance, the cinema is more a language, the vehicle for an "author", a means of self expression. The American tradition sees cinema more as a mass entertainment, or a means of expressing reality. This affects the role of violence. The French use violence in a more romantic or significative role.<sup>43.</sup>

There can be generally be said to be two types of screen violence: either it is a basic theme, the fundamental ritual element in the genre, such as in crime film or westerns,<sup>64.</sup> or it is one of many constituent elements or devices. If the war film is universal, crime and westerns are American genres. When the French produce a police or detective film, there is a questioning of man and his role in society that is usually absent from its American counterpart.<sup>46.</sup>



There are certain constants in the treatment of violence in the cinema from which television conventions have also been drawn. For instance, in nearly all, the story revolves basically around the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice. Death is seldom presented as an awesome phenomenon but rather as a punishment or defeat.<sup>43</sup> There are, of course, departures from this role of violence, particularly in recent cinema, which are treated in the bibliography.<sup>66</sup>

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In this bibliography, the majority of works are American, with some from France. There are few English Canadian works developing the theme of violence in art, although special mention should be made of Margaret Atwood's Survival<sup>20</sup>. There is also little from Quebec. Those works that do treat violence in a critical manner, especially violence in Quebec cinema, tend to see its use as a function of a political approach.

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"Theory"; Denial of Reality, Violence, Alienation, Man Alive, and Toward a Film Structure.
- 69- McCONNEL, F.D. "Song of Innocence. The Creature from the Black Lagoon". in Journal of Popular Film 2 (Winter 1973): 14-28.  
Analyses this film and some aspects of the genre it belongs to in a political, psycho-social framework. He ends with the creature as a "symbol" of a threat of a glimpse of the American version of the abyss.
- 70- MURPHY, W. Thomas. "The Method of Why We Fight" in Journal of Popular Film 1 (Summer 1972): 185-196.  
Discusses Hollywood and World War Two with reference to the "Why We Fight" series: The Use of film to "teach lessons of politics and war, human suffering and human resourcefulness" p. 185. The seven films in the "Why We Fight" series are "Prelude to War", "The Nazis Strike", "Divide and Conquer", "Battle of Britain", "Battle of Russia", "Battle of China" and "War Comes to America".
- 71- SHAHEEN, Jack, G. "The War Game Revisited". in Journal of Popular Film 1 (Fall 1972): 299-308.  
Excellent commentary on the British film "The War Game", concerning what happens to the population after an atom bomb.
- 72- SIMON, John. "From Fake Happyendings to Fake Unhappyendings". in New York Times Magazine June 8, 1975: 18-35.  
Tries to answer, "does the American cinema reflect accurately the society in which we live"? The answer is a qualified yes.



- 73- SOBCHACK, Vivian, C. "The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in The Movies". in Journal of Popular Film 3 (Winter 1974): 2-14.

Documents how her personal reaction to scenes of violence on film has changed and how violence in film has changed using "Bonnie and Clyde" as a turning point.

- 74- WHITE, Dennis, L. "The Poetics of Horror: More than Meets The Eye". in Cinema Journal 12 (Spring 1973): 1-21. Discusses many horror movies under the headings: The Structure of horror: uncontrollable causation, Threats of animalization, Fear of the id, Fears of rejection and perfection, Chaos of the world and of dreams and Extension of everyday fears. The reason for the use of violence in horror movies becomes evident from the above.

#### Autres / General

#### Section française

- 75- BURGELIN, Olivier. La communication de masse. Paris, S.G.P.P., Collection le point de la question, 1970, 302p.

La violence n'est pas le thème majeur du livre mais l'auteur l'aborde à travers les 4 parties qui forment le livre. La première partie s'attache au type de fonctionnement social qui caractérise la communication de masse en Occident. La deuxième partie traite de la culture de masse, c'est-à-dire de l'ensemble des messages diffusés sur le marché. La troisième partie étudie les effets de la communication de masse et la dernière partie porte sur la communication impulsive, celle qui a pour but explicite la modification du comportement d'autrui.

- 76- Violence et Société, Sillery, Québec, Centre Québécois de Relations Internationales, Collection Choix, 1973. 125p.

English Section

- 77- ASHTON, Dore. "Response to Crises in American Art". in Art in America (January-February 1969): 24-35.  
A brief review of American art from Emerson to the present looking at art as a response to crises.
- 78- BENTLY, Eric. "Farce". in Corrigan R.W. Comedy, Meaning and Form. New York: Chandler, 1965: 279-303  
Tries to answer the question, "what does violence signify in art"? Talks of Aristotle's catharsis and Freud's comic catharsis, jokes, and the dialectic of farce - grave and gay at the same time. "If in melodrama, fear enjoys itself, in farce, hostility enjoys itself".
- 79- FRASER, John. Violence in the Arts. London: Cambridge University Press, 1974.  
A "personal" essay on the use and presence of violence in the arts. He discusses many mediums; pulp fiction, comics, films, theatre and philosophy. Fraser approaches the subject through such ideas as: revolt, victims, violators and responsibilities.
- 80- GOODLAD, J.S.R. The Sociology of Popular Drama. London: Heinemann, 1971.  
Explores such ideas as, is drama a mirror or a model of society, drama as a ritual and drama as reassurance and how drama may be used to resolve potential social problems and how discord is turned into harmony through drama.
- 81- MEIER, Kurt Von: "Violence: Art and the American Way". Arts Canada 25 (April 1968): 19-24, 51.  
Discusses American support - political and financial - of violent spectacles, war as an art form, especially the Vietnam war and the artist Ralph Ortiz and his use of violence in art.
- 82- MICHEL, L. and SEWALL, R.B. (ed.) Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1963.  
A collection of essays covering a wide range of topics concerned with the tragic form. The approach to the use of violence in tragedy in all the essays is very "clinical" or academic.

- 83- MILLS, Howard M. "Violence, Part One, The Lyrics of Violence". in The Chelsea Journal (January-February 1975): 11-16.  
"Violence, Part Two, Corporate Repentance: The Gospel Lyric". in The Chelsea Journal (March-April 1975): 69-75.  
A discussion of violence in the present Canadian experience. Does not talk directly of the use of violence in Canadian art but the inference is easily made.
- 84- MUNRO, Thomas. "Art and Violence". in Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 27 (Spring 1969): 317-322.  
A brief look at violence and art and a plea for aestheticians to undertake a program of increased research on the psychological and social effects of various types of art.
- 85- ROSENBERG, H. "Rosenberg on Violence in the Arts and Other Matters; Excerpts From a Taped Conversation". Arts Canada 26 (February 1969): 32-33.  
Related the use of violence in art and the gradual politicization of art.
- 86- WILLARD, C. "Violence in Art". in Art in America 57 (January 1969): 36-43.  
Uses Lorenze and Ardrey to analyse some of the violent art in the recent past.









